'So many sparks of fire': Dorothy Cottrell, modernism and mobility

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Abstract

The broad brush strokes of Dorothy Cottrell's paintings in the National Library of Australia mark her as a modernist artist, although not one who painted the burgeoning Sydney Harbour Bridge or bright still-life paintings of Australian flora. Rather, she captured the dun surrounds of Ularunda Station, the remote Queensland property to which she moved in 1920 after attending art school in Sydney. At Ularunda, Cottrell eloped with the bookkeeper to Dunk Island, where they stayed with nature writer E.J. Banfield, then relocated to Sydney. In 1924 they returned to Ularunda and Cottrell swapped her paintbrush for a pen, writing *The Singing Gold*. After advice from Mary Gilmore, whom her mother accosted in a pub, Cottrell send it to the *Ladies Home Journal* in America. It was snapped up immediately, optioned for a film and found a publisher in England, who described it as 'a great Australian book, and a world book'. Gilmore added, 'As an advertisement for Australia, it will go far — the *Ladies Home Journal* is read all over the world'. Cottrell herself also went far, emigrating to America, where she wrote *The Silent Reefs*, set in the Caribbean. Cottrell's creative, intellectual and physical peregrinations — all undertaken in a wheelchair after she contracted polio at age five — show how the local references the international, and vice versa. Through an analysis of the life and writing of this now little-known Queensland author, this essay reflects the regional and transnational elements of modernism as outlined in Neal Alexander and James Moran's *Regional Modernisms*, illuminating how a crack-shot with a rifle once took Queensland to the world.

Dorothy Cottrell's painting *Red Earth Country, Elmina* (1919) (Figure 1) depicts a pale-blue sky with white clouds, beneath which is a horizon line of dark grey trees, a strip of grass, then orange and burnt umber soil. Trees of a brighter green poke up in the foreground and background. The brushwork is obvious, the vegetation reduced to shapes rather than rendered realistically, the muted palette flattening the scene. These elements mark it as a post-impressionist painting akin to the work of Paul Cézanne, one of the pioneering artists of the modernist movement.

A similar scene is to be found in *The Singing Gold*, Cottrell's first novel:

> All about the homestead, just beyond the man-made green of the irrigations, washing the grey tide of the mulga, little-grey-trees-all-alike … The spell paddock

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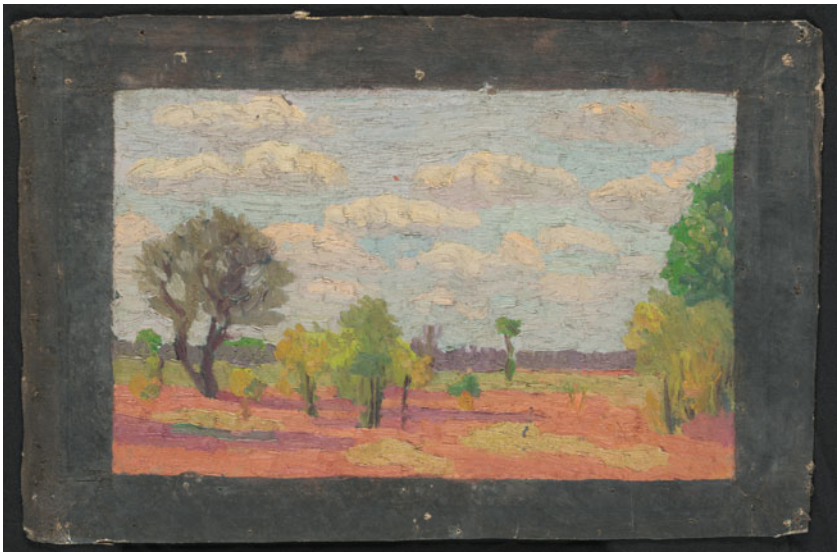

Figure 1
(Colour online) *Dorothy Cottrell*, Red Earth Country, Elmina *(1919), National Library of Australia, PIC Drawer 12836 #R9744.*

> had once been cleared, but the mulga came again a thousand times thicker than before, and there were dense, grey-ashen walls beside the red roads. (Cottrell 1928: 40–1)

The colours in this passage reflect those in Cottrell's image. The 'grey tide' of mulgas mirrors the grey line separating earth from sky. The patches of green are the 'man-made green of the irrigations' while the orange earth echoes the 'red roads'. Not only is there an accordance between the visual and literary descriptions through colour and imagery, but the language of the passage — accumulating imagery through repetition — mimics the style of Cottrell's post-impressionist painting, created through the application of blocks of pure colour. Together, these two images indicate how modernism travelled ten thousand miles from London to Sydney, then another 750 miles from Sydney to Elmina station near Wyandra in Queensland.

Typically positioned as a movement of the metropolis, scholars of modernism have only recently begun to explore 'the complex interactions between internationalist sensibilities, forged in the metropolitan milieu, and those pervasive regional or local affiliations that inflect the work of so many modernist writers' (Alexander and Moran 2013: 2). Through an examination of Cottrell's artistic practice, this essay draws attention to modernist representations of rural Queensland. It illuminates how, although *The Singing Gold* was a romance, it exhibited elements of modernist literary style not unlike Virginia Woolf's. It also draws upon the scholarship of Martin Hipsky, who has analysed the work of popular British women romance writers, to illuminate how high and more popular forms of literary modernist works were not dissimilar. Lastly, it considers the impact of Cottrell's disability on her creative practice, provoking the observation that,

despite the constant pain occasioned by polio, Cottrell remained an indomitable New Woman whose modernist novel prompted her to take Queensland to the world.[1]

Metropolitan influences

Cottrell was born in Picton, New South Wales in 1902, and contracted polio when she was five. It affected her legs, back and left arm, and confined her to a wheelchair. Her mother, Ida, recently separated from Cottrell's father, could not cope with Cottrell's disability. Ida returned to Queensland to keep house for her brother Ernest at his stations Elmina and Ularunda, while Cottrell was cared for in Sydney by her aunt Lavinia Fletcher. Cottrell never went to school, but was tutored in art by the sculptor Theodora Cowan (Ross and Rutledge 1981).

In 1918, when she was sixteen, Cottrell won a scholarship at the Royal Art Society of New South Wales. According to her biographical note in her novel *The Silent Reefs* (1954), she had studied at the school since she was fourteen and was its youngest head student. She was taught by Datilo Rubbo, an Italian who migrated to Sydney in 1897. In an unpublished novel, 'Wheel-rhyme', Cottrell described Rubbo as a 'quaint and forceful little man ... attired in velveteen trousers with a large patch on the seat, both the patch and the surrounding area were hued like the rainbow and striped as the zebra, for in moments of excitement the Master smote them loudly with a painty hand' (Cottrell 1991: 33). Rubbo's classes were noted for their receptiveness to modern ideas, and Helen Topliss suggests that Rubbo's Italian background meant he had 'already learnt something of post-impressionist techniques from his art studies in Naples at the end of the nineteenth century' (1996: 62). He travelled to Italy again in 1906, a year before he began teaching at the Royal Art Society, and returned with information about the contemporary art scene in Europe (1996: 62). Rubbo also cultivated an openness to experimentation in his students. In 1912 one of these students, Norah Simpson, travelled to Europe with her parents. She attended the Westminster School of Art for a few months and was exposed to the influence of the Camden Town Group, formed in 1911, which pioneered post-impressionism in Europe.

Roger Fry coined the term 'post-impressionist' when he curated the first exhibition of work by Cézanne, van Gogh and Manet in London in 1910–11, although at the time his label only indicated that these artists were painting after the impressionists. These artists rejected their predecessors' concern for 'the naturalist depiction of light and colour in favour of an emphasis on abstract qualities or symbolic content' (Boyle-Tuner 2013). Cézanne, who initially was associated with the impressionists, was dissatisfied with their 'focus on surface effects' (Macleod 1999: 195). He continued to use their techniques of broken brushwork and pure colour, but 'added weight and volume by emphasising the underlying geometric structure of objects' (1999: 195).

Fry's second exhibition of post-impressionism was showing in 1912 when Simpson was in London. Given that she also travelled to Paris, where she saw works by post-impressionists Cézanne, Gaugin, Matisse and Picasso, it is highly likely that she had some exposure to Fry's exhibition. On her return to Australia in 1913, she brought back photographs, books and prints depicting post-impressionist and cubist art (Smith, Smith and Heathcote 2001: 171). She transmitted her ideas

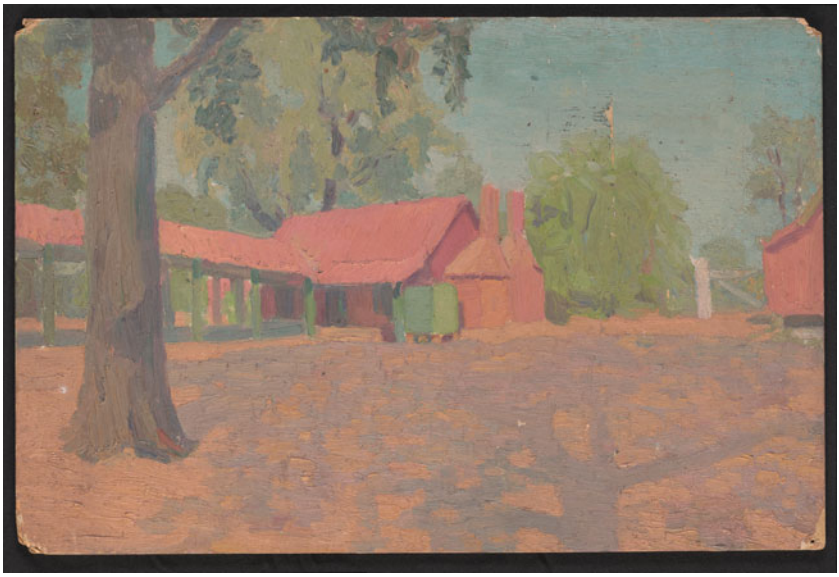

Figure 2
(Colour online) *Dorothy Cottrell*, Ularunda Cookhouse (1920), *National Library of Australia, PIC drawer 12836 #R9745.*

to her fellow students, as evidenced by Grace Cossington-Smith's *Sock Knitter* (1915), which depicts the artist's sister knitting socks for soldiers in World War I. Humphrey McQueen (1979: 4) notes the influence of Cézanne upon the work: it echoes the arrangement of the artist's portrait *Madame Cézanne Sewing* (c. 1877); the 'closely worked texture' of parts of the sitter's face, neck and hands mimics the way in which Cézanne created form through 'tiny rectangles of primary colours', while paint is applied to the surrounding more robustly, 'so thick that it could have been put down with a knife'; the bristle lines made by the brush are also evident.

These characteristics are also apparent in the paintings Cottrell made of her surroundings at Elmira and Ularunda. As with *Red Earth Country*, her painting *Ularunda Cookhouse* (1920) (Figure 2) uses a subdued palette that flattens the image. The brush strokes are obvious, lending a texture to the work that recalls Cézanne's. A focus on geometric shapes is apparent in the right-angle made by the tree and vertical beams and chimneys of the cookhouse with the horizon line, as well as the trapezoidal roof. The lower half of the work is dominated by the shadow of the tree, perhaps symbolising that the patterns of objects are as significant as those objects themselves, an aesthetic note that was also to appear in *The Singing Gold*.

Cottrell won her scholarship to the Royal Art Society for her drawings of two male nudes. In these and her other drawings, the influence of post-impressionists such as Cézanne is also evident. In a letter to Emile Bernard in 1904, Cézanne suggested that one should 'treat nature by means of the cylinder, the sphere, the cone, everything brought into proper perspective so that each side of an object or plane is directed towards a central point'. This tendency is evident in Cottrell's

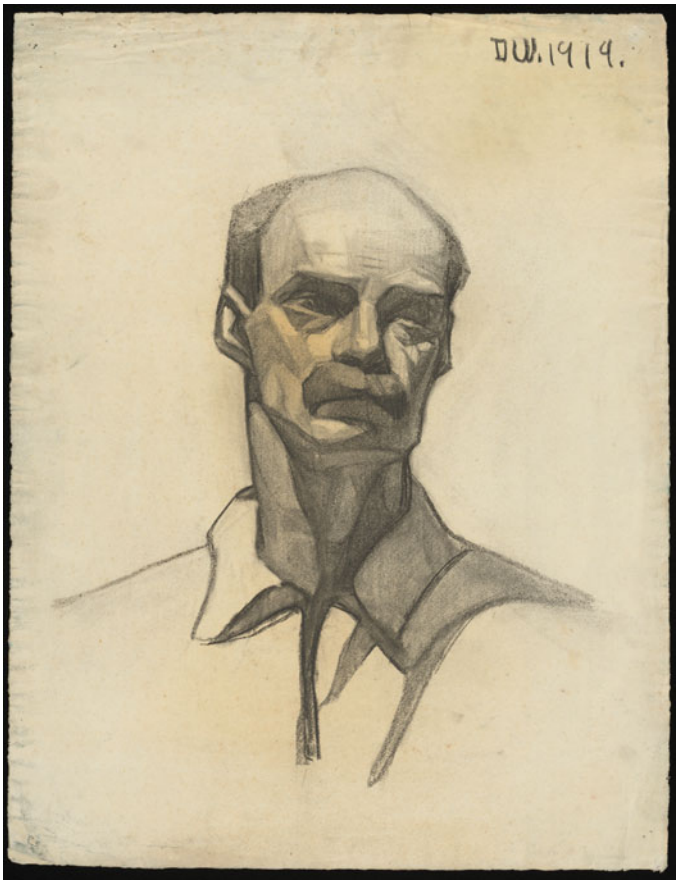

Figure 3
Dorothy Cottrell, Head of a Man *(1919), National Library of Australia, PIC Drawer 8643 #R9747/58.*

drawings, such as her *Head of a Man* (1919) (Figure 3). She divided her subject's head into shapes by creating angular areas of light and shade, rendering him weighty and almost sculptural. His body and gaze tilt towards the light source, as if he is looking into the future, and into modernity.

Cottrell's paintings and drawings, which are held in the National Library of Australia, were created in 1919 and 1920, when she returned to Queensland after her art schooling. Her surroundings not only prompted these visual responses, but also furnished her with experiences that formed the basis of her modernist novel, *The Singing Gold*. In 1922, Dorothy secretly married her uncle's bookkeeper, Walter Cottrell, and a few months later they moved to Dunk Island, off the coast between Rockhampton and Cairns. Dorothy's disability proved no barrier, as Walter carried her everywhere, and she was 'good at most things that could be done sitting down — including painting, sketching, rowing and shooting' (Ross 1997: 56).

The Cottrells stayed with journalist and nature writer E.J. Banfield, who had moved there in 1900. Barbara Ross writes that Banfield's 1909 work, *The Confessions of a Beachcomber: Scenes and Incidents in the Career of an Unprofessional*

Beachcomber in Tropical Queensland, had 'so caught [Cottrell's] imagination as a child that her mother had once tried to arrange for Dorothy to visit the reef and to holiday on Banfield's island' (1997: 57). As a young woman, her wish was fulfilled, but some six months after the Cottrells arrived Banfield died suddenly of peritonitis and their arrangements to stay on the island fell into disarray. They sailed for Sydney because Dorothy thought it the best place to sell her art, posters and cartoons. When the family's anger over their elopement died down, the Cottrells returned to Ularunda (1997: 65).

There Dorothy set down her paintbrush and picked up her pen. She wrote four manuscripts, of which two were published. The first, *The Singing Gold*, is a fictionalised account of her life. It follows the scrimmages of Joan, a tomboy who grows up on a property and elopes with her husband, Clippings, to an island then repairs to Sydney after she injures her foot in the sea and needs medical attention. When Clippings is killed in a car accident, Joan returns to the family property and has twins. The novel closes with the appearance of a former love interest of Joan's and the reignition of their affair.

The novel is a neat, cohesive romance enlivened with deft touches of humour, and it also deploys literary techniques that were used by modernist writers such as Woolf, including the vivid expression of colour, the use of long sentences to capture a stream of sensory impressions, and an emphasis on the quotidian rather than grand tropes such as nationalism. A focus on transcendence, common to both modernist literary works and romances, suggests that the romantic elements of the novel work with its modernist characteristics, rather than against them.

Modernist writers such as Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams often 'patterned their literary experimentation on parallels drawn from the visual arts' (Macleod 1999: 194). Jane Goldman (1998: 111) notes that Woolf was aware of possible literary analogies to post-impressionism and that she attended Fry's historical exhibition of post-impressionist painting, observing vibrant paintings by Cézanne and van Gogh. Goldman provides numerous examples of Woolf's symbolic use of colour, as in her story 'Kew Gardens' (1919). She interprets Woolf's radiant description of flowers as 'mouths with tongues of colour', capturing the snatches of conversations in the gardens and representing a 'multivocalness' (1998: 113).

The colour of Cottrell's surroundings in Queensland are one of the most striking features of her paintings. Unsurprisingly, given the resonances between modernist art and writing, her use of colour is also evident in *The Singing Gold*, as in her description of Joan exploring the station with her brother:

> Once we went through the boronia thickets in the spell paddock on a blue day of early summer. The dust was red as red, and the tall boronia bushes were at the height of their glory. Purest, most radiant yellow, thick massed with a million tiny golden cups, loaded and bent and packed with blossom, richer than the sunshine. Pale yellow, deep yellow, fresh flowers and clusters ripely sun-faded. Yellow, yellow, yellow, a great shout of colour between the hard blue sky and the red dust. (1928: 27)

Cottrell is not interested in creating a realist description of the boronia. Rather, her focus is on the impression of the thicket: a heap of bold, bright colour and scent. The sense of a mass of flowers is created through repetition of the word 'yellow', which

also imparts a texture that recalls the obvious brushwork of post-impressionist art. The word 'shout' not only evokes the boldness of the colour but also the young narrator's exuberance as she and her brother make their way through the thickets. Like Woolf's flowers, it pairs sound with colour. The flowers become abstracted, symbolising the freedom of youth.

A similar use of colour, symbol and sensory impressions is to be found in the scene to which the title of the novel refers, in which Joan's father drives a mob of sheep across the plains:

> And all day long a million larks fluttered singing into the sunshine, and the little cruel hawks of the plains followed the travelling sheep and preyed upon the living sparks of music. Singing they rose, although they knew that the hawks were waiting for them, singing even as they fled from the talons of death. For on the pitiless sun-bleached splendour of the downs there was no shelter for them, and so they rose singing by the hundred, and by the hundred were butchered. Once, as the sheep drifted slowly across the gold immensity of down, under the gold immensity of evening, and even the woolly backs were gold, and the rising larks and the hovering hawks so many sparks of fire, my father heard a little rush of song, and something soft and quivering darted into his open shirt and nestled against his great chest, while the thwarted hawk circled above his head, calling shrilly. He had carried the desperate beautiful atom there until the safety of darkness came. (1928: 25)

As in the previous passage, a fusing of sound and colour occurs through the phrase 'sparks of music' and through the language itself. Cottrell uses sibilance in 'singing, pitiless, sun-bleached, splendour, rush, song', and rhyme in 'spark and lark' to create the sense that the sky is swelling with wings and gold. She also uses the words 'little' and 'gold' in a painterly way, repeating them, as in her description of the boronia thickets, to build a sense of a golden cloud.

In both passages, Cottrell adopts Woolf's dictum espoused in her essay 'Modern Fiction': 'Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness. Let us not take it for granted that life exists more fully in what is commonly thought big than in what is commonly thought small' (1951: 190). Cottrell records the impressions as they appear to her narrator — visions that capture the sensory delight of summer, or the massed beauty of a flock of birds — rather than relying on fidelity to reality. As with Woolf, she uses long, meandering sentences to capture the fluidity with which these impressions are experienced. Although Cottrell does not enter into her characters' consciousness to the same degree as Woolf, she does attempt to represent a series of sensory perceptions.

None of Cottrell's writing after *The Singing Gold* features these long sentences and stylised use of language. The descriptions in her second novel, *Earth Battle* (1930) are functional rather than lyrical, while the language of her children's stories is simple. The sentences of her more plot-driven work, such as her magazine stories and third novel *The Silent Reefs* (1954), although vividly descriptive, do not build up, nor run on, in the style of *The Singing Gold*. That Cottrell attended to language and colour as she did in this novel suggests that her concerns for the aesthetics of her work were very much at the forefront of her mind, as they evidently were in

her post-impressionist paintings. She attempted to record an accumulating mass of atoms, whether these were birds or boronia, and this ties her firmly to modernist writers such as Woolf.

In 'Modern Fiction' Woolf (1951: 189) describes the impressions which an 'ordinary mind' receives on an 'ordinary day' as 'trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms.' As Lorraine Sim (2010) observes, the pairing of these striking adjectives with the ordinary serves to heighten its wonder: 'Rather than privileging heightened states of consciousness at the expense of more commonplace impressions,' she writes, 'Woolf is fundamentally concerned with their interconnection and coexistence in everyday experience' (2010: 11). The small, ordinary and quotidian is transformed into the marvellous. Notably, Cottrell concludes her passage about the larks with the line, 'He had carried the desperate beautiful atom there until the safety of darkness came.' The reference to an atom serves to hone in on the mass of gold, plucking out a tiny, single bird. It suggests fragility and nurture, signalling a subtle shift away from a glorified tradition of the masculine drover towards something more tender. In this, Cottrell shapes the way that impressions are perceived, as Woolf directs in 'Modern Fiction', so that the 'accent falls differently from of old' (1951: 189).

This trend away from masculine preoccupations to more feminine concerns was also apparent in modernist art. Cossington-Smith's *Sock Knitter*, for example, 'is a painting about the experience of middle-class women in Australia during 1915, describing what many Australian women were doing to assist the war effort, knitting socks and producing other clothing for the men of the first AIF' (Hoorn 1992: 9). Her contemporary, Margaret Preston, focused upon domestic subject-matter in works such as *Implement Blue* (1927), a collection of tea-things upon a tray, and *Still Life* (1927), a set of scales and other utensils from her kitchen, which highlights the positive impact of modern technology upon women (Hoorn 1992: 11).

Cottrell, too, dwelled upon the domestic, as in her description of tea things laid out at Joan's grandmother's:

> The sunlight lay across the breakfast table, and touched the thin cream china cups, so that the clear lemon-sliced tea chest cast its amber through their sides. The big silver bowl, filled with pale pink roses, glinted into green and mauve, and the tender flowers petals showed their faint veining in the sparkling light. (1928: 51)

The sunlight is transformative, altering the silver to green and purple. It is also so powerful that it reveals interiors to the reader — the amber tea and the veins of flowers. In Cottrell's hands, that which is quietly hidden is unearthed and shown to be extraordinary.

The many interiors, still-life works and portraits painted by female modernist artists, together with the use of domestic subject-matter, was not accidental. Women artists often worked in straitened circumstances and were denied the scope of their male counterparts. Their art has consequently often been 'easily relegated as being minor' (Topliss 1996: 24). The dismissal of modernist women's artistic expression has also extended to literature. In *Queensland and Its Writers*, as Vivienne Muller notes (2001), Cecil Hadgraft (1959: 65) derides *The Singing Gold*. He writes that

'for most adults the story must in parts be if not unreadable at least unbearable. It is written in a half-cosy half-romantic style that sets the teeth on edge. Very few novels can have the words *little* and *tiny* scattered so frequently through their pages like prunes in a pudding.' Woolf's dictum that life can also exist in 'what is commonly thought small' had not yet reached Hadgraft. Unsurprisingly, he thought Cottrell's second novel, with its more traditional rendition of the white settler pitted against a harsh land, a more palatable work.

It was not only their subject-matter that contributed to the exclusion of modernist women artists and writers, but also the practice of critique itself. Janet Wolff (1990: 54–5) writes that the 'absence of women from the modernist canon is another example of the exclusionary tactics of literary and art history, whereby women writers and artists are somehow written out of the account'. Jeanette Hoorn (1992) notes that there were no professional female art critics working in Australia until well into the post-war period, which also affected the reception of modernist art by women. When *Sock Knitter* was exhibited in the 1915 annual exhibition of the Royal Art Society, for example, 'it received no critical attention' (1992: 9).

Criticism on modernist literature has seen a deluge of critical writing about writers such as Woolf, Pound, T.S. Eliot and James Joyce, but less, as the editors of *Bad Modernisms* write, on 'less widely known women writers' and 'authors of mass cultural fiction' (Mao and Walkowitz 2010: 1). This may be one reason for the critical silence surrounding *The Singing Gold* despite its remarkable popularity during the author's lifetime.

Yet, as Hipsky (2011) has shown, the difference between high and more popular forms of modernism may not be so significant. Both forms hold out the promise of transportation; as he writes, 'the sublime quest of the modernist artist — and, frequently, or the modernist protagonist — finds a parallel phenomenon in the ecstatic transports of the romance protagonist' (2011: 219), and both forms 'may have actually served similar psychic functions for their early twentieth-century readers' (2011: 219). The medium of transportation is not only apparent in *The Singing Gold*, where the delight of the text itself shifts the reader out of reality; there are instances in which Joan herself is transported, as when she climbs into the blossoming pink almond-tree:

> There was nothing now save sunfiltered, pale blossom, fresh and cool and marvellous, pressing against my bare brown legs and arms and neck, brushing my eyelids, crinkling against my lips. I could not even see the sky, there was only the paleness, and the beauty, and the blossom, and a great buzzing of bees. It was like being in a fairy bath of flowers; from head to heel they embraced me … Surely it *was* a magic 'Bath of Beauty'; and like the princess from the enchanted well I should emerge transformed, radiantly lovely. (1928: 51; original emphasis)

The gentleness of the blossoms and the distinctive sensation of them 'crinkling' against Joan's lips are mirrored in the bubbling alliteration of 'blossom, brown, brushing, beauty, buzzing, bees and bath'. These sounds and senses combine to create in Joan a 'thrill', as she describes it (1928: 49), transporting her from her days as a rugged tomboy to a figure from a fairy tale. This description of the tree also echoes Cottrell's painting *Ularunda Cookhouse*, which is dominated by the beautiful, branched shadow cast by the tree. Both in her modernist painting and her

novel, Cottrell aspired to transport her reader from reality to its more charming, if imaginary, counterpart.

Mobility and the New Woman

Cottrell's novel would have been unlikely to make it into print had she not met modernist author Mary Gilmore in 1925 or 1926, when she and her mother happened to be staying in the same hotel as Gilmore in Sydney. After reading the manuscript, Gilmore pronounced the author a 'genius' and suggested that she send it to the *Saturday Evening Post* or the *Ladies Home Journal*, both American magazines.

Gilmore's long career, as Ann Vickery (2007: 18) writes, 'typifies the transition from the Victorian to the "modern" both in cultural attitude and formal experimentation'. While her poetry 'reflects a more properly Victorian sense of women's creative and social roles, she was not unaware of modern psychological, political and poetic developments' (2007: 51). Her politics and awareness of contemporary poetics would have lent her an understanding of Cottrell's style as she edited Cottrell's manuscript 'in order that a typist could get some real idea of the sentences ... her spelling might have come straight down from Shakespeare and Queen Elizabeth' (Gilmore 1928: 13).

Cottrell's novel was an immediate success. The *Ladies Home Journal* offered her five thousand dollars for serial rights, then Houghlin Mifflin and Co in Boston, and Hodder and Stoughton in England offered her book publication (Gilmore 1928). It fulfilled Gilmore's prediction that, 'As an advertisement for Australia it will go far — *The Ladies Home Journal* is read all over the English-speaking world' (1928: 13). She added that the work showed Australia 'as it has never been shown before' (1928: 13).

As a consequence of Cottrell's sales, both in Australia and abroad, Cottrell began to think about travelling overseas. She had dallied with this idea not long after she left Dunk Island, writing to her Aunt Lavinia that she could 'make a really good living as a commercial artist if I am so minded, and that there is a great opening in America for anyone trained to the work' (cited in Ross 1997: 64). Five years after she was married, the idea of relocating was cemented for a particularly regional reason: the Australian taxation system. As Cottrell's uncle Ernest explained in a letter,

> If from her books and film rights Dossie should make £10,000 in America while living here Federal and state tax will plunder her of about £7000 ... The only way for Dossie to escape being plundered by her fellow Australians is to become an American subject and to live away from the country in which she was born and which she loves and which is the source of her inspiration. (cited in Ross 1997: 68)

Cottrell's modernist novel took her to the world, but it was also most likely the reason why she no longer continued with her bold, lyrical style. In America, she published her second novel, *Tharlane* (1930, known as *Earth Battle* in Australia). Although it was successful, the Cottrells were hard hit by the Depression. They abandoned the house they built at Lake Elsinore in California and took to the road in their car. Cottrell, once more profiting from her art, began to write children's books and sell stories to magazines. Her 1936 novella about Chut the Kangaroo,

Wilderness Orphan, was made into a successful film, *Orphan of the Wilderness* (Ross 1991: 25). A mystery set in the Caribbean, *The Silent Reefs*, was published in 1954 and serialised in the *Saturday Evening Post*, then made into another film, *The Secret of the Purple Reefs* (1960). As there is no trace of Cottrell's literary influences, it is difficult to ascertain why she did not return to the style of *The Singing Gold*, but her poor and peripatetic lifestyle and her removal from Australian artistic circles most likely had an impact — one that is still resonating today.

A 1931 article in *The Age*, 'Four Australian Women Novelists', penned by an anonymous DH, canvasses the works of Henry Handel Richardson, Katherine Susannah Prichard, Dorothy Cottrell and M. Barnard Eldershaw. The writer concludes:

> In the work of these four women from the south, the west, the north and the east is found a vast divergence in technique, temperament, experience and deduction. They are making invaluable contributions to Australian literature, and out of this effort something is evolving, something individual, national, different — not a feeble imitation of overseas literature, not just an echo of older civilisations, and that is what is needed. (DH 1931: 6)

Cottrell's contemporaries Richardson, Prichard and Eldershaw have received much critical attention, but a silence has persisted around Cottrell.[2] Attention to her work, and particularly its modernist influences, is sorely overdue, not least because without modernist art Cottrell would never have travelled so far.

Bernard Smith (2001: 198) observes that 'the introduction of post-impressionism to the country owed much to women'. He cites the commonly held assumption that 'the reason for this unusually important contribution to Australian art during the twenties and early thirties is to be found probably in the occurrence of the First World War' (2001: 198). Although he acknowledges that Norah Simpson brought modernist art to Australia, he does not dwell upon the circumstances of women artists' lives that led them to pioneer modernism in Australia.

A more nuanced explanation for the increased prevalence and profile of Australian women artists at this time, as Helen Topliss (1996) writes, may be traced to women's suffrage. South Australian women gained the right to vote in 1895 and all other states had followed by 1911. This gave women increasing independence, which they exercised by travelling overseas to study. Topliss observes that the 'eagerness with which women artists undertook travel overseas to further their studies and to witness the art and landscapes to it, such as Cézanne's Aix-en-Provence, testifies to their newfound independence' (1996: 13). Like many of these women artists, Cottrell was single-minded and unconventional, with a great sense of adventure. Her upbringing in outback Queensland, as with writers such as Gilmore, Marie Pitt and Mary Fullerton, probably contributed to her independence. Vickery writes that these women 'believed that their pioneering background gave them a sense of independence that challenged conventions of feminine passivity' (2007: 5). Forever moving and mobile like her artistic peers, it is not surprising that Cottrell took modernism back to remote Queensland and applied it to her artistic and literary practice. Cottrell differs from her peers, however, in that she was always in a wheelchair.

In an article, 'How to Wear a Wheelchair' (1950: 45), she wrote:

> The keynote of conventional counsel to those who contact the disabled is to pretend that the disabled are like everybody else. And a whole bookful of nonsense that has arisen around disability is based on the shame of difference and the ban against the admission of difference.

After two years of pain and being made to walk when she was young, which she could never do well, Cottrell was relieved to live her life in a wheelchair. She wrote in her article, 'I had learned the first great lesson for the disabled. Be different — specialise — and you can go places' (1950: 76). It is unlikely that much of this would have occurred had Cottrell not had a disability. Being confined to a wheelchair meant that she needed to use her hands and mind. As Ross (1991: 23) indicates, her parents sent her to art school in the hope that she would learn a vocation through which she could support herself. Although she achieved financial success through her writing rather than her art, her artistic post-impressionist influences contributed to its striking style and popularity.

The bowling of Cottrell's wheelchair may signify just how far this dauntless Queenslander travelled. She was a New Woman, as defined by Patricia Smith (2010: 79), for she

> had a mind and wishes of her own. She defied traditional gender roles by seeking an education equal to that available to men as well as an occupation in which she could put her education to use and earn an independent income. Accordingly, she would be free to marry for love rather than economic security.

Cottrell married for love, made money through her writing and was a physically active, engaging woman. Through word, mind and wheel, she took Queensland's golden sunlight and plains to the world.

Refocusing attention from cities, traditionally perceived as the epicentre of modernism, to regional areas such as the orange plains of Ularunda, yields fresh insights into modernism. It shows how a New Woman, influenced by those who travelled abroad, could apply modernist ideas to her art and writing about rural Queensland. The success of *The Singing Gold*, Cottrell's first novel, demonstrates her natural aptitude for writing, while her zest for adventure led her to a wide audience in America. That Cottrell achieved such mobility and success with a disability is testimony to her bravery and adventurousness. The affection she inspired in her family, as well as in Gilmore, is testimony to her bright and lively character. The trail of sparks she left in her letters and novels as she realised her transnational promise should surely now accrete into a glow of recognition.

Endnotes

1 Part of this essay was presented at a symposium on Queensland Modernism in February 2016. I thank the participants and the reviewers for their useful comments and suggestions on this work.

2 Barbara Ross interviewed family members and collected material to create an archive on Cottrell at the National Library of Australia. She wrote several articles on the details of Cottrell's life and arranged for the publication of extracts of Cottrell's unpublished novels. Belinda McKay (2004a, 2004b) has written on Cottrell's questionable representations of Indigenous people. Cheryl Taylor (2009) also dwells on Cottrell's evocations of island life in *The Singing Gold,* her unpublished novel *Nika Lurgin* and a selection of her short stories.

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